

# TRUE FASTING IS ABSTINENCE FROM EVIL

The holy fathers of the Church state that fasting is primarily spiritual in nature. The purpose of abstaining from various meat and dairy products is to strengthen the soul as it strives to prevail over the desires of the flesh, to help subdue the passions of the soul and body, to detach our mind from lowly matter and vain things, and thus elevate our mind and heart to God.

St. Basil defines fasting as “abstinence from evil.” He says: “Do not restrict the benefit of fasting to abstinence from food alone. True fasting is abstinence from evil. Let go of every unjust tie. Do not sadden your brother. Forgive others their debts. Do not argue and fight when you fast. You do not eat meat, but you bite your brother. You stay away from wine, but you do not refrain from cursing others. You wait until evening to eat, but you spend your entire day dragging others through court.” And he adds: “Fasting is speaking in moderation; refraining from anger; separation from [evil] desires, criticism, lies, and oaths. Deprivation of these things is true fasting. Fasting is good when it is accompanied by these things.”

Another venerable author notes: “Fasting has two wings: prayer and almsgiving. Without these, fasting is incapable of taking off [to Heaven].”

When fasting is accompanied by the above virtues, it has tremendous power and it is pleasing to God. When, however, fasting is limited to food alone, there is little or no benefit. The demons never eat, but that does not help them at all. God does not want us to persist in sin and fulfill our evil desires when we fast.

“In the days of your fasts, you seek your own desires...I did not choose this fast,” says the Lord. “Nor if you should bow your neck like a ring and spread sackcloth and ashes under yourself, could you thus call such a fast acceptable” (Isa. 58:5). What is acceptable then? “Loose every bond of wrongdoing; untie the knots of violent dealings; cancel the debts of the oppressed; and tear apart every unjust contract. Break your bread for the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house. If you see a naked man, clothe him.” If you do these things, says the Lord, “then your light shall break forth as the morning, and your healing shall spring forth quickly...then you shall cry out, and God will hear you” (Isa. 58:7-9).

Do you see, dear reader, what true fasting is? Let us try to fast in this manner, and let us not believe that fasting is limited to simply avoiding certain foods. This is not the fasting that is expected of us. Along with abstinence from food, we must simultaneously avoid all the things that are harmful to our soul and also exercise spiritual self-restraint. Our mouth should fast from inappropriate words, our eyes from impure images, our ears from vulgar sounds, and our mind from sinful thoughts. Blessed are the Christians who fast the entire Great Lent in this manner. They truly fast, and their fasting is accepted by God.